

Conference Paper

Psychosemantical Approach to Volition Research

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Abstract

The research into the ratio of objective and subjective indicators of the volitional qualities of an individual conducted by the Department of General and Social Psychology of the UrFU discovered some limitations of the corresponding approaches to such multidimensional objects as volition. The research into individual semantic fields of the concept of 'volition' will make up for the existing methodological gap in that area. The research was conducted in 2017. The sample consisted of 77 students of the Department of Psychology. The semantic differential method in the modification by I.L. Solomin was used as a basis. The list of objects has been changed and expanded according to the tasks of the research. The second method of research is the associative experiment. The results were processed by using the methods of cluster analysis, factor analysis and content analysis. An analysis of individual cluster trees discovered a rather large variability of the semantic relationships between the objects under study. Several sub-groups of respondents were identified according to the individual characteristics of the semantic fields in relation to the object 'volition', the sub-group 'success of activities', the sub-group 'personality qualities', the sub-group 'negative objects' and the sub-group 'object is not defined'. Most students consider volition either as an applied tool of educational or professional activities, or as a self-sufficient personal mechanism. With the help of factor analysis, the features of the affective attitude toward the object 'volition' in respect to the sample as a whole are revealed. The associative experiment made it possible to identify the key topic markers that characterize the volition of respondents of different semantic sub-groups. For the sub-group 'success of activities', it is 'power'; it is 'time' for the sub-group 'personality qualities', in particular, 'responsibility'; it is 'firmness' for the sub-group 'negative objects'. The psychosemantics approach in studying volition allows us to identify topics that clarify the semantic nuances of the concept of 'volition' in the minds of the subjects. The method of the semantic differential and the method of associative experiment are mutually complementary with respect to research into the semantic sphere of a personality. The results obtained provide a necessary part of a comprehensive study of volition and the volitional qualities of a person.

Keywords: volition, volitional qualities, responsibility, students, psychosemantic approach, semantic differential, semantic field, associative experiment, semantic structures of consciousness, representations, individuality, cluster trees, topic markers

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1. Introduction

The problem of volition is one of the key ones yet under-researched in the psychology of personality. The questions of determining the phenomenon of volition, shaping the volition of a personality, describing specific volitional behavioral mechanisms and classifying volitional qualities remain open [2, 3, 11, 14]. The research is devoted to the search for methods for diagnosing volitional aspects of a personality [4, 5]. In 2016, the Department of General and Social Psychology of UrFU conducted a research into the ratio of objective and subjective indicators of the volitional qualities of students. The result was the absence of interrelations between these indicators, which is indicative of significant limitations of the appropriate diagnostic methods in relation to such complex objects as volition [6].

Studying volition requires a comprehensive approach and involves turning to the analysis of the semantic structures of consciousness in relation to this concept. A.R. Luria stressed the need to study the individual semantic fields of words as the basis for understanding the structural components of consciousness in relation to a variety of objects. 'Each word excites the whole complex system of connections being the center for an entire semantic network, actualizes certain semantic fields that characterize an important aspect of the psychological structure of a word' [7, p. 80]. In our opinion, the consideration of semantic fields in relation to an object clarifies the mechanisms of its understanding by respondents and can act as an intermediary between objective and subjective methods of studying it.

The methods of experimental psychosemantics make it possible to obtain the information about any representations and relationships of a person, such as intrapersonal and interpersonal, professional, organizational, national, political, moral, aesthetic. [12, 13] Understanding and cognizing the subject of diagnostics provide the basis for developing the content of techniques to take into account the personality characteristics of the tested subjects [10].

2. Materials and Methods

The research was conducted in 2017 in the premises of the Department of Psychology of the Ural Federal University. The sample consisted of 77 students from year 1 to year 5. For research, the semantic differential method [9] and the associative experiment method [1] were used. The data were processed in using the methods of the cluster,

factor, and content analysis. The research was carried out in several stages: (1) identification of individual trends of semantic fields with respect to the object 'volition' with the cluster analysis method; (2) determination of the affective loading of the object 'volition' by Ch. Osgood factors in the sample as a whole; (3) comparative analysis of free associations in relation to the 'volition' concept tested in different semantic sub-groups.

According to A.R. Luria, the semantic differential method is rather limited since the evaluation is performed by using artificially created scales and reflects the affective meaning of words [7, 8]. The method was used to preliminarily assess individual trends in the creation of semantic fields of the tested subjects. A variant of the Osgood method was used in the modification of I.L. Solomin [12]. The list of objects was changed and expanded according to the tasks of the research.

3. Results

An analysis of individual cluster trees revealed a rather large variability in the semantic relationships between the objects under research. An analysis of individual dendrograms made it possible to distinguish three main sub-groups of the tested subjects that differed in their tendency to understand the object 'volition'. The first group, 'success of activities' includes students who perceive volition as an applied tool for educational and professional achievements. The second group, 'personality qualities', consists of respondents who refer to volition as an intrapersonal mechanism. The third group, 'negative assessments' represents students associating volition with unpleasant events and considering it as a mechanism for overcoming them.

Representatives of the sub-group 'success of activities' (22% of respondents) associate the object 'volition' with the objects 'my career', 'my studies', 'psychology', 'my profession', that is concepts that symbolize the professional or educational activities. The sequence of clusters varies within the group and reflects the individual specificity of students' semantic fields. In a number of cases, there was a tendency to unite objects belonging to the activities of students with the objects 'volition' and 'material well-being' into a common cluster. Volition in the minds of such students is seen as an instrument of achievement. Strong effort is an important applied aspect of the activities contributing to the achievement of success.

In the sub-group of 'personality's qualities' (50% of respondents), the object 'volition' has a semantic connection with objects related to the personal sphere. The clusters of representatives of this subgroup include the objects 'creativity', 'I', 'happiness',

and 'love'. A number of representatives of this sub-group associate volition with the temporal organization of an individual (objects 'my past', 'my present', 'my future'). In 17% of cases from the general sample, the 'volition' forms a single cluster with the object 'responsibility' or is included in the clusters adjacent to it. In the semantic space of representatives of a given sub-group these objects are quite close and form a first-order connection at a small distance from the base of the dendrogram. That is, some of the subjects practically identify volition with responsibility as a personality trait. The large number of cluster trees combining the objects 'volition' and 'responsibility' allowed us to consider them as an additional semantic sub-group.

The third sub-group, 'negative objects' is small and includes 4% of respondents. Despite the fact that the traditional definition of volition is connected with overcoming obstacles, it is rare that the objects 'stress', 'failure', 'illness' and 'trouble' are united in common clusters. For the majority of the tested objects, there is a positive attitude in the individual system of meanings of the concept of 'volition'.

In the remaining 24% of cases, 'volition' does not form close semantic links with any of the proposed objects. Cluster trees in this sub-hierarchy are poorly differentiated, objects are at a great distance from the base of the tree. An additional sub-group with the working title 'object not defined' was not considered when conducting an associative experiment at this stage of the research.

At the second stage of the research, the affective tendencies in the ideas about volition in respect of the sample as a whole were considered. As can be seen in Table 1, volition is represented in the minds of the subjects in the form of five factors, the first of which corresponds to the 'force' factor, according to C. Osgood. The factor has a slightly greater factor load and includes the scales 'deep', 'strong' and 'large'. Factor 2 is also a characteristic of force but with the opposite sign. Some respondents associate volition with tenderness, lightness and gentleness. In our opinion, such a contradiction in the assessment of volition as a strong quality of a personality requires further research.

Factor 3 (Table 1) corresponds to the activity factor according to C. Osgood and emphasizes the perception of volition as an active principle in the psyche. The maximum load is obtained on the 'stormy' scales which puts some emphasis on the uncontrollability of volitional actions in understanding the respondents.

The evaluation factor is differentiated into two sub-factors with similar factor weights, which also emphasizes the inconsistency of attitude toward the volition of the tested subjects. Factor 4 as leading scales includes the poles 'clean' and 'beautiful' and can be designated as a positive evaluation factor. Factor 5 is a factor of negative evaluation with the leading pole of the scale 'contrary'.

In the minds of the respondents, volition is presented as an active quality of the psyche. For most respondents, it is a strong feature, at the same time, a number of students feel the ease of the volitional effort. Evaluation of volition as a quality is diametrically opposed and is probably related to the individual experience of the tested subjects. However, the presence of bright assessments of the object emphasizes the subjective significance of volition in the minds of the respondents.

TABLE 1: General factor analysis results ($n = 77$).

	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4	Factor 5
Sad-joyful	-0.36	0.08	0.29	0.63	-0.13
deep-shallow	-0.79	0.01	-0.07	-0.13	-0.04
Cold-hot	0.01	0.29	0.53	-0.06	-0.20
Pleasant-disgusting	0.19	-0.05	0.11	-0.08	0.82
Heavy-light	-0.12	0.66	0.11	0.24	-0.04
Slow-fast	-0.10	0.27	0.57	0.18	0.18
Bitter-sweet	0.09	0.18	0.20	0.19	-0.61
Strong-weak	-0.81	0.32	-0.03	0.02	0.06
Calm-turbulent	-0.05	-0.21	0.76	-0.17	-0.06
Good-bad	0.58	-0.21	0.03	-0.14	0.39
Small-large	0.80	-0.03	0.11	0.15	-0.05
Active-passive	0.38	0.11	-0.51	-0.26	0.17
Dirty-clean	-0.10	0.10	-0.34	0.74	-0.03
Soft-hard	-0.28	-0.57	-0.11	0.21	0.12
Cheerful-languid	0.54	0.13	-0.25	-0.06	0.56
Beautiful-ugly	0.10	0.21	-0.08	-0.70	0.42
Gentle-severe	-0.13	-0.76	0.05	0.06	0.06
Sharp-blunt	0.02	0.48	-0.39	-0.47	0.04
Expl.Var	3.04	2.06	1.98	2.01	1.83
Prp.To	0.17	0.11	0.11	0.11	0.10

Note: Significant factorial loads are shown by scales in bold.

At the third stage, we conducted an associative experiment in sub-groups selected on the basis of cluster analysis. The experiment was conducted in the form of an individual conversation lasting 20-40 minutes. Time for the tested subjects was not limited. The data are processed by using content analysis. The associations of respondents were assigned to the following groups: (1) personality characteristics; (2) negative perception of the concept; (3) a positive image-association; (4) negative image-association; (5) the active concepts related to activities; (6) values and needs; (7) feelings and sensations. In the sub-groups, the categories of associative connections specific to each of them were identified.

Let us consider in more detail the results of an associative experiment for the sub-group 'success of activities' (Table 2). Most associations are received with such words and phrases as 'work', 'study', 'perform', 'go to university' and other attributes of applied aspects of activities. There are also characteristics of personality, values, and needs. As a special category for this sub-group, associations on the 'power' topic were identified. Associations with the concepts of this category indicate the aspiration of representatives of the sub-group 'success of activities' to influence other people, control them and become a leader.

TABLE 2: Content analysis of the associations of the success in activities subgroup.

Category	Absolute frequency of mentions	Relative frequency of mentions, %	Relative share of category
Characteristics of personality	57	26	0.26
Negative perception	9	4	0.04
Positive image	12	6	0.06
Active concepts related to activities	69	32	0.32
Power	24	11	0.11
Values and needs	39	18	0.18
Negative image	6	3	0.03

In the 'Personality Qualities' sub-group, the categories 'personality characteristics' and 'values and needs' have the greatest weight (Table 3). Associations with concepts from this category confirm the data of cluster analysis. Students perceive volition more likely, as the intrapersonal mechanism uniting many features of a personality. The presence of associations of the category 'active concepts associated with activities' indicates the importance of the connection of the qualities of a personality with the activities. In the sub-group, it was not possible to identify a particular topic-marker group. The proportion of positive images of volition increases.

In the additional sub-group 'Responsibility' such a marker could be identified, those are associations with the concept of time. The number of associations with the active concepts associated with activities is increasing. Volition and responsibility are considered as the necessary conditions for achieving the result on time. The categories 'values and needs' and 'personality characteristics' have less weight than the category 'active concepts'. Two of these categories are also leading for the respondents of the 'Responsibility' sub-group, which speaks of the perception of volition by the tested subjects as an intrapersonal mechanism and explains its semantic relationship with responsibility.

TABLE 3: Content analysis of the associations of the personality’s characteristics subgroup.

Category	Absolute frequency of mentions	Relative frequency of mentions, %	Relative share of category
Characteristics of personality	33	17	0.17
Negative perception	15	7	0.07
Positive image	24	12	0.12
Active concepts related to activities	45	22	0.22
Values and needs	69	34	0.34
Feelings and sensations	6	3	0.03
Negative image	9	5	0.05

TABLE 4: Content analysis of the associations of the additional responsibility subgroup.

Category	Absolute frequency of mentions	Relative frequency of mentions, %	Relative share of category
Characteristics of personality	48	20	0.2
Negative perception	21	8	0.08
Positive image	9	4	0.04
Active concepts related to activities	75	30	0.3
Time	16	6	0.06
Values and needs	63	26	0.26
Feelings and sensations	9	4	0.04
Negative image	5	2	0.02

In the sub-group ‘Negative Objects’, the category ‘negative perception’ has the greatest weight (Table 5). Associations with concepts from that category are confirmed by the cluster analysis data, volition in the sub-group is connected with overcoming obstacles, unpleasant sensations, and heavy images. A special category of associative links for the sub-group ‘Negative Objects’, ‘firmness’ is singled out. The category includes the associations ‘stone’, ‘flint’, ‘something solid’, and ‘metal’. Respondents perceive volition with difficulty as such and practically do not associate it with the qualities of personality.

TABLE 5: Content analysis of the associations of the negative objects subgroup.

Category	Absolute frequency of mentions	Relative frequency of mentions, %	Relative share of category
Characteristics of personality	16	14	0.14
Negative perception	22	20	0.20
Positive image	10	9	0.09
Active concepts related to activities	22	20	0.20
Values and needs	14	12	0.12
Firmness	20	18	0.18
Negative image	8	7	0.07

4. Conclusion

The psychosemantics approach in the research of volition allows us to identify topics that clarify the semantic nuances of the concept in the minds of the tested subjects. The majority of students will see volition as an intrapersonal mechanism, less number perceive volition as an applied aspect in achieving the goals of activities. In general, the cluster analysis data coincide with the associative experiment data which indicates their mutual complementation. At the same time, the associative experiment made it possible to reveal more subtle nuances of the respondents' semantic structures with regard to the concept of volition.

The discovered peculiarities of the semantic fields of the volition concept include the tendency to unite in sub-groups in connection with external results or in connection with personal properties, primarily responsibility. In the first case, a special topic-marker is the category of associations 'power', in the second case, it is 'time'. The negatively colored semantic fields for the concept of volition are rare. The general tendency of the affective load of the concept of the object 'volition' for the student sample consists in the polar aesthetic assessments of the phenomenon, the contradictory understanding of force, but in the unambiguous feeling of volition as an active mental mechanism.

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